

Enlightenment Under the Fulbright Tree

By Dr.V.Shubhalaxmi

“Hey when is the next Breakfast with Butterflies?” inquired a familiar face when I entered her office building. “ Oh! You still remember the event....it happens once a year every October” I quickly replied. Often I am surprised how people associate me with this unique event which I started in 2004, after my first stint at United States as a fellow of Indo-American Environmental Leadership Programme in 2003. It was in Bronx Zoo in New York where I attended their Breakfast with Butterflies (BWB) event. I was amused by the title and I decided to launch an Indian version at my workplace at BNHS Conservation Education Centre (CEC) in Mumbai. The event became a hit in its first year wherein people participated in hundreds, over the years the event was widely covered by print and electronic media, many film personalities to attended this event.

The success of this event inspired me to launch sequels such as Brunch with Birds, Bash with Bugs, Lunch with Lilies, Meal with Moths and so on. Nevertheless the BWB still remains a star as many other organization and groups across the country have started offering this programme. The success of this event could be measured in terms of popularity butterflies have gained in past decade. Today *butterflying* is equivalent to *birdwatching* in India. Several Yahoo Groups and Facebook Groups have evolved for butterfly enthusiasts. Mumbai’s first open-air butterfly park was established by one of the participant of BWB.

Volunteering for nature was another idea I picked up from Institute of Ecosystem Studies at Millbrook in New York State. I launched the volunteering programme in 2004. Since then every year we conducted volunteer training programmes which generated a workforce of volunteers. We trained more than 500 individuals and have 25 of them helping us. This initiative too gave me popularity because anyone who is in need of a volunteer dials CEC number. It’s like a volunteer placement centre now!

I developed a range of educational materials post Fulbright Fellowship. I came across unique Mobile Educational Trunks at Missoula Natural History Society, Montana. I waited for five years to seek appropriate funding and then developed five educational trunks on different wildlife themes. This was a first of its kind educational resource in India. Many groups at CEC have enjoyed the activities from this ‘magic box’.

When I went on my second Fulbright Fellowship as a Hubert H. Humphrey fellow in 2009-2010, my career and skill set skyrocketed. It was at the Boston University my career took a twist. I signed up for courses in Non-profit Management and Distance Education. I gained a new identity of Non-profit Management Specialist when I launched management workshops for nonprofits. In 2010, I launched India’s first of its kind online courses in natural history. These courses have become popular with the young India. The success model of the volunteering programme and course modules were presented as Poster in the Conference of Parties (COP 10) last year.

In 2012, the tasted the real success of my training. My project on Capacity Development of Environmental NGOs through Management Workshops was chosen for Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund. Through this project till now 153 professionals from 98 NGOs have undergone the management training. *This is my moment of truth of serving the Mother Earth through the enrichment of Fulbright.*